The rise of D2C in Bangladesh

From scrappy Instagram brands to global contenders

NOMROTA SARKER

Walk through any university campus, scroll through Instagram shops, or browse local marketplaces, and one pattern becomes clear: Bangladesh is not just seeing more startups, it is seeing the birth of its first generation of direct-to-consumer brands. What began as Facebook sellers during the pandemic has evolved into digitally native brands building identity-first products, bypassing traditional distribution, and rewriting how consumer companies are built in the country. This is not a trend. It is a structural shift.

A MARKET TOO LARGE TO IGNORE

Bangladesh is projected to become the 9th largest consumer market globally by 2030, powered by rising incomes, dense urbanisation, and a population exceeding 170 million. D2C brands tend to emerge where three conditions collide: fragmented retail, young consumers, and fast digital adoption. Bangladesh now has all three - at scale. In markets like this, brands are not inherited. They are still up for grabs.

The new wave of Bangladeshi D2C brands

Unlike legacy FMCG players built on distribution muscle, today's D2C brands are built on narrative, niche, and speed. Across categories, a pattern is emerging.

Food & beverage: Small-batch condiment, dessert, and snack brands are building cult followings online. Some began with hand-filled bottles sold through Instagram DMs and evolved into rapidly iterated SKU stacks shaped directly by customer feedback loops.

Fashion and modest wear: Instagram-first labels are building loyalty through identity - modest wear, campus streetwear, and occasionwear - shaped more by culture than seasonal calendars.

Beauty and personal care: Indie skincare founders are turning education into distribution. Content is the funnel; trust is the conversion layer.

Hyper-niche verticals: From pet treats to journaling kits, founders are building in categories that were historically too small or too fragmented for incumbents to care about.

What stands out is not just diversity, it's compression. The time from idea to revenue has collapsed from years to weeks.

FOUNDER ENERGY AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Bangladesh's D2C ecosystem is still founder-powered infrastructure. In the early stages, building a consumer brand here often means doing everything yourself: formulation, packaging, customer support, logistics, and content. The founder is not just the CEO. The founder is the stack.

Across conversations with operators, the pattern repeats: products tested in kitchens, packaging decided over late-night WhatsApp threads, launches validated through campus pop-ups and comment sections. This scrappiness is not a weakness. It is a training ground. In the absence of deep venture infrastructure, founders themselves are becoming the ecosystem: equal parts marketer, manufacturer, and community builder.

THE CORE ECONOMICS OF D2C

At its core, D2C is not a branding strategy. It is a margin strategy. Traditional FMCG value chains are layered, going from manufacturer, to distributor, to wholesaler, to retailer, and finally, to customer. D2C compresses this: from manufacturer, to brand, and immediately to customer. That compression creates three structural advantages.

The first is margin retention, where fewer intermediaries mean more gross margin and more room to reinvest into packaging, product quality, and brand building. The second is data ownership, in which D2C brands own the relationship, not just the transaction. That unlocks faster product loops, retention-led growth, and tighter cohort intelligence. The third advantage entails that distribution used to be the moat, but now, the community is. The strongest D2C brands are not just selling products. They are accumulating attention and trust, assets that compound.

ILLUSTRATION: MD. ZAHIDUR RABBI

WHY BANGLADESH IS UNIQUELY SUITED FOR D2C

Several structural factors make Bangladesh an unusually fertile ground for D2C growth.

Social commerce maturity: Bangladesh leapfrogged traditional e-commerce into Facebook, WhatsApp, and creator-led commerce. Customer acquisition here is conversational, not algorithmic.

Founder relatability: Consumers often know the founder's face, voice, and story. In trust-sensitive categories like food and skincare, intimacy is a competitive advantage.

Trust gaps in legacy brands: Younger consumers increasingly gravitate toward transparent indie brands over opaque incumbents, especially where ingredients or freshness matter.

Manufacturing depth: Bangladesh has deep capabilities in textiles, food processing, and light manufacturing, lowering the activation energy required to launch product companies. Increasingly, founders are pairing local manufacturing with global storytelling, building brands that are export-aware from day one.

THE INDIA FLYWHEEL

Bangladesh's D2C moment resembles where India stood roughly five to seven years ago, before its explosion of venture-backed consumer brands. India's D2C boom created playbooks, supply chains, and capital familiarity. For Bangladesh, that creates proximity advantages. Shared tastes, logistics corridors, and diaspora overlap make India the most natural expansion layer for Bangladeshi consumer brands. In many ways, India is not a competition. It is a rehearsal.

THE EU OPPORTUNITY

If India represents scale, Europe represents premiumisation. European consumers increasingly reward brands that can deliver clean labels, traceable sourcing, and authentic origin stories, areas where founder-led brands outperform industrial incumbents. Bangladesh enters this conversation with three quiet advantages: export familiarity, compliance experience, and manufacturing credibility. What garments did for factories, D2C could do for brands: add narrative on top of capability.

THE RISKS AHEAD

The D2C tailwind is real, but so are the traps. The first is ad dependency. Globally, many D2C brands died not from lack of demand, but from paid acquisition addiction. There's also commoditisation, where low barriers would invite copycats. Without brand depth, differentiation evaporates quickly. You would also have to consider working capital pressure, in which inventory cycles would quietly kill more consumer brands than competition ever does. Distribution gravity would also be a concern, as, ironically, most successful D2C brands eventually move offline. Digital builds brands; physical builds scale. The winners will treat D2C not as an identity, but as an entry strategy.

WHAT COMES NEXT

From where I stand, Bangladesh's next decade will likely produce three categories of D2C winners. The first is category owners dominating local verticals. The second is regional challengers expanding into India and Southeast Asia. And finally, global niche exporters would be seen selling culture-led products abroad.

If even a fraction succeeds, Bangladesh could evolve from a manufacturing powerhouse into a consumer brand exporter. And that would mark a real shift in how the country shows up globally. Because for the first time, Bangladesh wouldn't just make the world's products. It would sell its own stories, told by the founders who built them.

Nomrota Sarker *is a consumer brand founder and operator building in Bangladesh's emerging D2C ecosystem. Her work focuses on unit economics, cross-border scalability, and culture-led brand building across South Asia.*

Views expressed in this article are of the author's own and may not reflect the editorial stance of The Daily Star.

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How we learn from work and what we often miss

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

In most workplaces, outcomes travel faster than understanding. A project concludes, results are noted, and the organisation moves on. Success is celebrated, failure is reviewed, and both are quickly absorbed into the next cycle of execution. The underlying assumption is rarely questioned: that outcomes, by themselves, contain lessons. Recent research discussed in MIT Sloan Management Review suggests otherwise. The idea of "learning from execution" challenges the tendency to treat results as self-explanatory and argues that without deliberate analysis, both success and failure can mislead. At the centre of this argument is a deceptively simple distinction. Achieving a goal is not the same as understanding why it was achieved. Falling short is not the same as understanding what went wrong. Yet in practice, these two are often conflated.

Consider how success is typically handled. A campaign performs well, a client approves a proposal, and a target is exceeded. The immediate response is to scale. More resources are allocated, similar strategies are replicated, and the approach is institutionalised. The logic appears sound: something worked, so it should be repeated. What is often missing, however, is clarity on causation. A campaign might succeed because it coincided with favourable timing. A proposal might be accepted because it aligned with a decision already in motion. A target might be met due to external conditions rather than internal execution. When these variables are not examined, success becomes difficult to reproduce. What appears to be a reliable strategy may in fact be an isolated outcome.

Failure follows a different, but equally problematic, trajectory. When an initiative does not deliver, the response is usually corrective. Reviews are conducted, accountability is assigned, and attention shifts toward preventing repetition. While this process is necessary, it often stops short of identifying what remains useful within the failure. An unsuccessful project can still contain elements worth preserving. An idea may be sound but poorly framed. A strategy may be viable but mistimed. A process may reveal insights about constraints or audience behaviour. When failure is treated as a closed case rather than a source of information, these elements are lost.

The framework emerging from the Sloan discussion attempts to bring discipline to this ambiguity. It suggests that outcomes fall into four broad categories. Some are true "hits" – successful and clearly understood. Others are "lucky" – successful, but without clarity on causation. Some are "learning" outcomes – unsuccessful, but rich in insight. And finally, there are "defeats", where neither success nor understanding is achieved. This distinction matters because it introduces discipline into what is often an instinctive process. Instead of reacting to outcomes, it requires organisations to pause and examine them. A true hit can be scaled with confidence. A lucky outcome calls for restraint, not enthusiasm. A learning outcome deserves deeper attention, not dismissal. A defeat signals the need to rethink more fundamentally.

What follows from this is not just interpretation, but action. The research

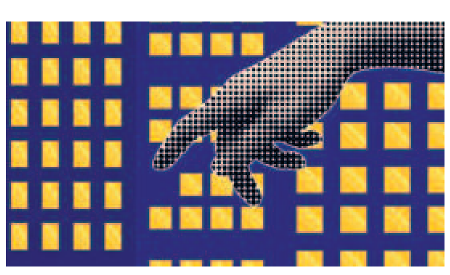
ILLUSTRATION: MD. ZAHIDUR RABBI

outlines a structured approach called DIRS: Decompose, Interpret, Reward, Scale. Decomposition requires breaking work into its components, rather than treating it as a single outcome. Interpretation focuses on identifying which of those components actually drove results. Rewarding shifts attention away from outcomes alone and toward behaviours that generate insight. Scaling, crucially, comes last, once there is confidence in what is being repeated. This sequence challenges a common instinct in workplaces, where scaling often happens immediately after success. By placing it at the end, the framework introduces a pause between outcome and replication. That pause is where clarity is built.

For individuals, particularly those in the early stages of their careers, this has practical consequences. Much of professional growth is assumed to come from exposure. The more one does, the more one learns. Yet exposure without interpretation has limits. Take a common scenario. A presentation is well received. The presenter may conclude that their approach was effective. But without analysing the structure of the argument, the sequencing of information, or the specific moments that engaged the audience, the success remains difficult to replicate. The next presentation may follow a similar format without achieving the same result. Conversely, when a presentation fails to resonate, the instinct may be to attribute it to nerves or insufficient preparation. While these factors may play a role, they do not fully explain the outcome. A closer examination might reveal that the central argument lacked clarity, or that the supporting data did not align with the audience's expectations. Without identifying these factors, the lesson remains incomplete.

The distinction between outcome and understanding becomes particularly important over time. Professionals who rely on outcomes alone may improve their efficiency, but not necessarily their judgment. They complete tasks faster, yet continue to encounter similar challenges. Patterns remain unrecognised, and improvement becomes incremental.

This process does not require elaborate systems. It begins with asking more precise questions. After completing a task, instead of settling for a general assessment, it is more useful to identify specific drivers. What element had the greatest impact on the result? At what point did the direction of the work shift? Which assumption proved inaccurate? Such questions shift attention from results to reasoning. They transform experience into something that can be applied, rather than simply recalled. Documentation further strengthens this process. In environments where tasks move quickly, insights can fade just as quickly. Without personal reflection, feedback addresses only part of the picture. When combined with self-analysis, however, it becomes more precise and actionable. As such, growth depends on how experience is processed.

In many organisations, learning is described as a priority. Yet it often exists as an abstract goal rather than a structured practice. The idea of learning from execution suggests that learning must be embedded into the way work is reviewed. It must be treated as a process, not an assumption. For young professionals, this offers a clearer path to development. The value of work lies not only in its completion, but in the insight it generates. Two individuals may share similar experiences, but the one who examines those experiences more closely will progress further. Work, in this sense, is no longer a sequence of tasks. It is a series of opportunities to understand how decisions shape outcomes. Without that understanding, experience accumulates without direction. With it, experience becomes a source of deliberate growth.

Microsoft to invest $10 billion in Japan for AI infrastructure and training

NEXT STEP DESK

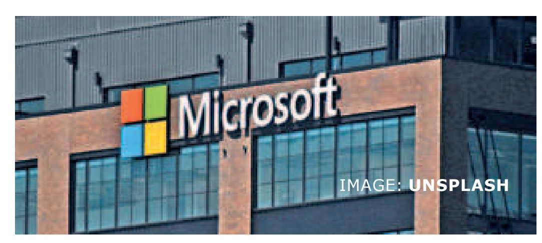

IMAGE: UNSPLASH

Microsoft has announced a $10 billion investment in Japan from 2026 through 2029, focusing on artificial intelligence infrastructure, cybersecurity partnerships, and workforce development, according to an official blog post by the tech giant.

The company will collaborate with Sakura Internet and SoftBank to offer GPU-based AI computing services through Azure, with customer data remaining in Japan, states the official announcement. On cybersecurity, Microsoft said it will deepen threat intelligence sharing with Japan's National Cybersecurity Office and strengthen collaboration with the National Police Agency through its Digital Crime Unit. The announcement says Microsoft will also launch a $1 million research grant programme and a fellowship to support Japanese researchers using AI.

For workforce training, Microsoft said it will commit to training one million engineers and developers by 2030 in partnership with Fujitsu, Hitachi, NEC, NTT Data, and SoftBank. It will provide AI-skilling opportunities to approximately 580,000 workers through the Japanese Electrical Electronic and Information Union. The company said it is also expanding its CyberSmart AI Programme through the Kyushu Semiconductor Human Resource Development Consortium.

AI becomes top reason for US job cuts, report finds

NEXT STEP DESK

Artificial intelligence (AI) became the leading cause of job cuts in the United States last month, according to a monthly analysis by Challenger, Gray & Christmas, an outplacement and executive coaching firm. US-based employers announced 60,620 job cuts in March, a 25% increase from February but a 78% drop compared with the same month last year, the report said. In March, 15,341 cuts, or one in four, were directly attributed to artificial intelligence. Other major reasons included office closings, restructuring, and market or economic conditions.

In the first quarter of 2026, AI has been linked to 27,645 job cuts, representing roughly 13% of all year-to-date layoffs. Since 2023, AI has been cited in nearly 100,000 job cut announcements, stated the report. The technology sector recorded the highest number of layoffs in the US in the first quarter, with 52,050 cuts, up 40% from the same period last year.

AI is used as a scapegoat for job cuts, says Salesforce CEO

NEXT STEP DESK

Marc Benioff, CEO of US-based cloud software company Salesforce, has said that many companies are wrongly blaming artificial intelligence for layoffs, arguing that the current wave of job cuts is being misunderstood.

In a recent interview with tech company Forward Future, Benioff said that when companies cut jobs, the reasons vary. Some are reducing headcount because costs have become too high. Others are trimming staff because they have made financial commitments, particularly to data centres, that they need to pay for. There are also those cutting to rebalance their workforce in response to changes brought by AI.


IMAGE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

He warned against lumping all these cases together, adding, "I don't think most people still really understand what is really going on, and it's too easy to make AI the scapegoat. I think for some CEOs it's the lazy way out."

Benioff argued that leaders should be more specific about the real reasons behind their decisions, even if they face criticism. "You're going to take bullets no matter what because that is your role as CEO," he said. "You have to look forward and put everything back together."